



Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Distr.: General
19 May 2014
Original: English

Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Eleventh session

31 March–11 April 2014

General comment No. 1 (2014)

Article 12: Equal recognition before the law

I. Introduction

1. Equality before the law is a basic general principle of human rights protection and is indispensable for the exercise of other human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights specifically guarantee the right to equality before the law. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities further describes the content of this civil right and focuses on the areas in which people with disabilities have traditionally been denied the right. Article 12 does not set out additional rights for people with disabilities; it simply describes the specific elements that States parties are required to take into account to ensure the right to equality before the law for people with disabilities, on an equal basis with others.

2. Given the importance of this article, the Committee facilitated interactive forums for discussions on legal capacity. From the very useful exchange on the provisions of article 12 by experts, States parties, disabled persons' organizations, non-governmental organizations, treaty monitoring bodies, national human rights institutions and United Nations agencies, the Committee found it imperative to provide further guidance in a general comment.

3. On the basis of the initial reports of various States parties that it has reviewed so far, the Committee observes that there is a general misunderstanding of the exact scope of the obligations of States parties under article 12 of the Convention. Indeed, there has been a general failure to understand that the human rights-based model of disability implies a shift from the substitute decision-making paradigm to one that is based on supported decision-making. The aim of the present general comment is to explore the general obligations deriving from the various components of article 12.

4. The present general comment reflects an interpretation of article 12 which is premised on the general principles of the Convention, as outlined in article 3, namely, respect for the inherent dignity, individual autonomy — including the freedom to make one's own choices —, and independence of persons; non-discrimination; full and effective participation and inclusion in society; respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity; equality of opportunity; accessibility;



equality between men and women; and respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.

5. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities each specify that the right to equal recognition before the law is operative "everywhere". In other words, there are no permissible circumstances under international human rights law in which a person may be deprived of the right to recognition as a person before the law, or in which this right may be limited. This is reinforced by article 4, paragraph 2, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which allows no derogation from this right, even in times of public emergency. Although an equivalent prohibition on derogation from the right to equal recognition before the law is not specified in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the provision in the International Covenant covers such protection by virtue of article 4, paragraph 4, of the Convention, which establishes that the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities do not derogate from existing international law.

6. The right to equality before the law is also reflected in other core international and regional human rights treaties. Article 15 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women guarantees women's equality before the law and requires the recognition of women's legal capacity on an equal basis with men, including with regard to concluding contracts, administering property and exercising their rights in the justice system. Article 3 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights provides for the right of every person to be equal before the law and to enjoy equal protection of the law. Article 3 of the American Convention on Human Rights enshrines the right to juridical personality and the right of every person to recognition as a person before the law.

7. States parties must holistically examine all areas of law to ensure that the right of persons with disabilities to legal capacity is not restricted on an unequal basis with others. Historically, persons with disabilities have been denied their right to legal capacity in many areas in a discriminatory manner under substitute decision-making regimes such as guardianship, conservatorship and mental health laws that permit forced treatment. These practices must be abolished in order to ensure that full legal capacity is restored to persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others.

8. Article 12 of the Convention affirms that all persons with disabilities have full legal capacity. Legal capacity has been prejudicially denied to many groups throughout history, including women (particularly upon marriage) and ethnic minorities. However, persons with disabilities remain the group whose legal capacity is most commonly denied in legal systems worldwide. The right to equal recognition before the law implies that legal capacity is a universal attribute inherent in all persons by virtue of their humanity and must be upheld for persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others. Legal capacity is indispensable for the exercise of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. It acquires a special significance for persons with disabilities when they have to make fundamental decisions regarding their health, education and work. The denial of legal capacity to persons with disabilities has, in many cases, led to their being deprived of many fundamental rights, including the right to vote, the right to marry and found a family, reproductive rights, parental rights, the right to give consent for intimate relationships and medical treatment, and the right to liberty.

9. All persons with disabilities, including those with physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, can be affected by denial of legal capacity and substitute decision-making. However, persons with cognitive or psychosocial disabilities have been, and still are, disproportionately affected by substitute decision-making regimes and denial of legal capacity. The Committee reaffirms that a person's status as a person with a disability or the existence of an impairment (including a physical or sensory impairment) must never be

grounds for denying legal capacity or any of the rights provided for in article 12. All practices that in purpose or effect violate article 12 must be abolished in order to ensure that full legal capacity is restored to persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others.

10. This general comment focuses primarily on the normative content of article 12 and the State obligations that emerge therefrom. The Committee will continue to carry out work in this area so as to provide further in-depth guidance on the rights and obligations deriving from article 12 in future concluding observations, general comments and other documents.

II. Normative content of article 12

Article 12, paragraph 1

11. Article 12, paragraph 1, reaffirms the right of persons with disabilities to be recognized as persons before the law. This guarantees that every human being is respected as a person possessing legal personality, which is a prerequisite for the recognition of a person's legal capacity.

Article 12, paragraph 2

12. Article 12, paragraph 2, recognizes that persons with disabilities enjoy legal capacity on an equal basis with others in all areas of life. Legal capacity includes the capacity to be both a holder of rights and an actor under the law. Legal capacity to be a holder of rights entitles a person to full protection of his or her rights by the legal system. Legal capacity to act under the law recognizes that person as an agent with the power to engage in transactions and create, modify or end legal relationships. The right to recognition as a legal agent is provided for in article 12, paragraph 5, of the Convention, which outlines the duty of States parties to "take all appropriate and effective measures to ensure the equal right of persons with disabilities to own or inherit property, to control their own financial affairs and to have equal access to bank loans, mortgages and other forms of financial credit, and ... ensure that persons with disabilities are not arbitrarily deprived of their property".

13. Legal capacity and mental capacity are distinct concepts. Legal capacity is the ability to hold rights and duties (legal standing) and to exercise those rights and duties (legal agency). It is the key to accessing meaningful participation in society. Mental capacity refers to the decision-making skills of a person, which naturally vary from one person to another and may be different for a given person depending on many factors, including environmental and social factors. Legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (art. 6), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (art. 16) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (art. 15) do not specify the distinction between mental and legal capacity. Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, however, makes it clear that "unsoundness of mind" and other discriminatory labels are not legitimate reasons for the denial of legal capacity (both legal standing and legal agency). Under article 12 of the Convention, perceived or actual deficits in mental capacity must not be used as justification for denying legal capacity.

14. Legal capacity is an inherent right accorded to all people, including persons with disabilities. As noted above, it consists of two strands. The first is legal standing to hold rights and to be recognized as a legal person before the law. This may include, for example, having a birth certificate, seeking medical assistance, registering to be on the electoral role or applying for a passport. The second is legal agency to act on those rights and to have those actions recognized by the law. It is this component that is frequently denied or

diminished for persons with disabilities. For example, laws may allow persons with disabilities to own property, but may not always respect the actions taken by them in terms of buying and selling property. Legal capacity means that all people, including persons with disabilities, have legal standing and legal agency simply by virtue of being human. Therefore, both strands of legal capacity must be recognized for the right to legal capacity to be fulfilled; they cannot be separated. The concept of mental capacity is highly controversial in and of itself. Mental capacity is not, as is commonly presented, an objective, scientific and naturally occurring phenomenon. Mental capacity is contingent on social and political contexts, as are the disciplines, professions and practices which play a dominant role in assessing mental capacity.

15. In most of the State party reports that the Committee has examined so far, the concepts of mental and legal capacity have been conflated so that where a person is considered to have impaired decision-making skills, often because of a cognitive or psychosocial disability, his or her legal capacity to make a particular decision is consequently removed. This is decided simply on the basis of the diagnosis of an impairment (status approach), or where a person makes a decision that is considered to have negative consequences (outcome approach), or where a person's decision-making skills are considered to be deficient (functional approach). The functional approach attempts to assess mental capacity and deny legal capacity accordingly. It is often based on whether a person can understand the nature and consequences of a decision and/or whether he or she can use or weigh the relevant information. This approach is flawed for two key reasons: (a) it is discriminatorily applied to people with disabilities; and (b) it presumes to be able to accurately assess the inner-workings of the human mind and, when the person does not pass the assessment, it then denies him or her a core human right — the right to equal recognition before the law. In all of those approaches, a person's disability and/or decision-making skills are taken as legitimate grounds for denying his or her legal capacity and lowering his or her status as a person before the law. Article 12 does not permit such discriminatory denial of legal capacity, but, rather, requires that support be provided in the exercise of legal capacity.

Article 12, paragraph 3

16. Article 12, paragraph 3, recognizes that States parties have an obligation to provide persons with disabilities with access to support in the exercise of their legal capacity. States parties must refrain from denying persons with disabilities their legal capacity and must, rather, provide persons with disabilities access to the support necessary to enable them to make decisions that have legal effect.

17. Support in the exercise of legal capacity must respect the rights, will and preferences of persons with disabilities and should never amount to substitute decision-making. Article 12, paragraph 3, does not specify what form the support should take. "Support" is a broad term that encompasses both informal and formal support arrangements, of varying types and intensity. For example, persons with disabilities may choose one or more trusted support persons to assist them in exercising their legal capacity for certain types of decisions, or may call on other forms of support, such as peer support, advocacy (including self-advocacy support), or assistance with communication. Support to persons with disabilities in the exercise of their legal capacity might include measures relating to universal design and accessibility — for example, requiring private and public actors, such as banks and financial institutions, to provide information in an understandable format or to provide professional sign language interpretation — in order to enable persons with disabilities to perform the legal acts required to open a bank account, conclude contracts or conduct other social transactions. Support can also constitute the development and recognition of diverse, non-conventional methods of communication, especially for those

who use non-verbal forms of communication to express their will and preferences. For many persons with disabilities, the ability to plan in advance is an important form of support, whereby they can state their will and preferences which should be followed at a time when they may not be in a position to communicate their wishes to others. All persons with disabilities have the right to engage in advance planning and should be given the opportunity to do so on an equal basis with others. States parties can provide various forms of advance planning mechanisms to accommodate various preferences, but all the options should be non-discriminatory. Support should be provided to a person, where desired, to complete an advance planning process. The point at which an advance directive enters into force (and ceases to have effect) should be decided by the person and included in the text of the directive; it should not be based on an assessment that the person lacks mental capacity.

18. The type and intensity of support to be provided will vary significantly from one person to another owing to the diversity of persons with disabilities. This is in accordance with article 3 (d), which sets out "respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity" as a general principle of the Convention. At all times, including in crisis situations, the individual autonomy and capacity of persons with disabilities to make decisions must be respected.

19. Some persons with disabilities only seek recognition of their right to legal capacity on an equal basis with others, as provided for in article 12, paragraph 2, of the Convention, and may not wish to exercise their right to support, as provided for in article 12, paragraph 3.

Article 12, paragraph 4

20. Article 12, paragraph 4, outlines the safeguards that must be present in a system of support in the exercise of legal capacity. Article 12, paragraph 4, must be read in conjunction with the rest of article 12 and the whole Convention. It requires States parties to create appropriate and effective safeguards for the exercise of legal capacity. The primary purpose of these safeguards must be to ensure the respect of the person's rights, will and preferences. In order to accomplish this, the safeguards must provide protection from abuse on an equal basis with others.

21. Where, after significant efforts have been made, it is not practicable to determine the will and preferences of an individual, the "best interpretation of will and preferences" must replace the "best interests" determinations. This respects the rights, will and preferences of the individual, in accordance with article 12, paragraph 4. The "best interests" principle is not a safeguard which complies with article 12 in relation to adults. The "will and preferences" paradigm must replace the "best interests" paradigm to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy the right to legal capacity on an equal basis with others.

22. All people risk being subject to "undue influence", yet this may be exacerbated for those who rely on the support of others to make decisions. Undue influence is characterized as occurring, where the quality of the interaction between the support person and the person being supported includes signs of fear, aggression, threat, deception or manipulation. Safeguards for the exercise of legal capacity must include protection against undue influence; however, the protection must respect the rights, will and preferences of the person, including the right to take risks and make mistakes.

Article 12, paragraph 5

23. Article 12, paragraph 5, requires States parties to take measures, including legislative, administrative, judicial and other practical measures, to ensure the rights of

persons with disabilities with respect to financial and economic affairs, on an equal basis with others. Access to finance and property has traditionally been denied to persons with disabilities based on the medical model of disability. That approach of denying persons with disabilities legal capacity for financial matters must be replaced with support to exercise legal capacity, in accordance with article 12, paragraph 3. In the same way as gender may not be used as the basis for discrimination in the areas of finance and property,¹ neither may disability.

III. Obligations of States parties

24. States parties have an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the right of all persons with disabilities to equal recognition before the law. In this regard, States parties should refrain from any action that deprives persons with disabilities of the right to equal recognition before the law. States parties should take action to prevent non-State actors and private persons from interfering with the ability of persons with disabilities to realize and enjoy their human rights, including the right to legal capacity. One of the aims of support in the exercise of legal capacity is to build the confidence and skills of persons with disabilities so that they can exercise their legal capacity with less support in the future, if they so wish. States parties have an obligation to provide training for persons receiving support so that they can decide when less support is needed or when they no longer require support in the exercise of their legal capacity.

25. In order to fully recognize “universal legal capacity”, whereby all persons, regardless of disability or decision-making skills, inherently possess legal capacity, States parties must abolish denials of legal capacity that are discriminatory on the basis of disability in purpose or effect.²

26. In its concluding observations on States parties’ initial reports, in relation to article 12, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has repeatedly stated that States parties must “review the laws allowing for guardianship and trusteeship, and take action to develop laws and policies to replace regimes of substitute decision-making by supported decision-making, which respects the person’s autonomy, will and preferences”.

27. Substitute decision-making regimes can take many different forms, including plenary guardianship, judicial interdiction and partial guardianship. However, these regimes have certain common characteristics: they can be defined as systems where (i) legal capacity is removed from a person, even if this is in respect of a single decision; (ii) a substitute decision-maker can be appointed by someone other than the person concerned, and this can be done against his or her will; and (iii) any decision made by a substitute decision-maker is based on what is believed to be in the objective “best interests” of the person concerned, as opposed to being based on the person’s own will and preferences.

28. States parties’ obligation to replace substitute decision-making regimes by supported decision-making requires both the abolition of substitute decision-making regimes and the development of supported decision-making alternatives. The development of supported decision-making systems in parallel with the maintenance of substitute decision-making regimes is not sufficient to comply with article 12 of the Convention.

29. A supported decision-making regime comprises various support options which give primacy to a person’s will and preferences and respect human rights norms. It should provide protection for all rights, including those related to autonomy (right to legal

¹ See the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, art. 13 (b).

² See the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art. 2, in conjunction with art. 5.

capacity, right to equal recognition before the law, right to choose where to live, etc.) and rights related to freedom from abuse and ill-treatment (right to life, right to physical integrity, etc.). Furthermore, systems of supported decision-making should not over-regulate the lives of persons with disabilities. While supported decision-making regimes can take many forms, they should all incorporate certain key provisions to ensure compliance with article 12 of the Convention, including the following:

(a) Supported decision-making must be available to all. A person's level of support needs, especially where these are high, should not be a barrier to obtaining support in decision-making;

(b) All forms of support in the exercise of legal capacity, including more intensive forms of support, must be based on the will and preference of the person, not on what is perceived as being in his or her objective best interests;

(c) A person's mode of communication must not be a barrier to obtaining support in decision-making, even where this communication is non-conventional, or understood by very few people;

(d) Legal recognition of the support person(s) formally chosen by a person must be available and accessible, and States have an obligation to facilitate the creation of support, particularly for people who are isolated and may not have access to naturally occurring support in the community. This must include a mechanism for third parties to verify the identity of a support person as well as a mechanism for third parties to challenge the action of a support person if they believe that the support person is not acting in accordance with the will and preferences of the person concerned;

(e) In order to comply with the requirement, set out in article 12, paragraph 3, of the Convention, for States parties to take measures to "provide access" to the support required, States parties must ensure that support is available at nominal or no cost to persons with disabilities and that lack of financial resources is not a barrier to accessing support in the exercise of legal capacity;

(f) Support in decision-making must not be used as justification for limiting other fundamental rights of persons with disabilities, especially the right to vote, the right to marry, or establish a civil partnership, and found a family, reproductive rights, parental rights, the right to give consent for intimate relationships and medical treatment, and the right to liberty;

(g) The person must have the right to refuse support and terminate or change the support relationship at any time;

(h) Safeguards must be set up for all processes relating to legal capacity and support in exercising legal capacity. The goal of safeguards is to ensure that the person's will and preferences are respected.

(i) The provision of support to exercise legal capacity should not hinge on mental capacity assessments; new, non-discriminatory indicators of support needs are required in the provision of support to exercise legal capacity.

30. The right to equality before the law has long been recognized as a civil and political right, with roots in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Civil and political rights attach at the moment of ratification and States parties are required to take steps to immediately realize those rights. As such, the rights provided for in article 12 apply at the moment of ratification and are subject to immediate realization. The State obligation, provided for in article 12, paragraph 3, to provide access to support in the exercise of legal capacity is an obligation for the fulfilment of the civil and political right to equal recognition before the law. "Progressive realization" (art. 4, para. 2) does not apply to the

provisions of article 12. Upon ratifying the Convention, States parties must immediately begin taking steps towards the realization of the rights provided for in article 12. Those steps must be deliberate, well-planned and include consultation with and meaningful participation of people with disabilities and their organizations.

IV. Relationship with other provisions of the Convention

31. Recognition of legal capacity is inextricably linked to the enjoyment of many other human rights provided for in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, including, but not limited to, the right to access justice (art. 13); the right to be free from involuntary detention in a mental health facility and not to be forced to undergo mental health treatment (art. 14); the right to respect for one's physical and mental integrity (art. 17); the right to liberty of movement and nationality (art. 18); the right to choose where and with whom to live (art. 19); the right to freedom of expression (art. 21); the right to marry and found a family (art. 23); the right to consent to medical treatment (art. 25); and the right to vote and stand for election (art. 29). Without recognition of the person as a person before the law, the ability to assert, exercise and enforce those rights, and many other rights provided for in the Convention, is significantly compromised.

Article 5: Equality and non-discrimination

32. To achieve equal recognition before the law, legal capacity must not be denied discriminatorily. Article 5 of the Convention guarantees equality for all persons under and before the law and the right to equal protection of the law. It expressly prohibits all discrimination on the basis of disability. Discrimination on the basis of disability is defined in article 2 of the Convention as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction on the basis of disability which has the purpose or effect of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal basis with others, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms". Denial of legal capacity having the purpose or effect of interfering with the right of persons with disabilities to equal recognition before the law is a violation of articles 5 and 12 of the Convention. States have the ability to restrict the legal capacity of a person based on certain circumstances, such as bankruptcy or criminal conviction. However, the right to equal recognition before the law and freedom from discrimination requires that when the State denies legal capacity, it must be on the same basis for all persons. Denial of legal capacity must not be based on a personal trait such as gender, race, or disability, or have the purpose or effect of treating the person differently.

33. Freedom from discrimination in the recognition of legal capacity restores autonomy and respects the human dignity of the person in accordance with the principles enshrined in article 3 (a) of the Convention. Freedom to make one's own choices most often requires legal capacity. Independence and autonomy include the power to have one's decisions legally respected. The need for support and reasonable accommodation in making decisions shall not be used to question a person's legal capacity. Respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity (art. 3 (d)) is incompatible with granting legal capacity on an assimilationist basis.

34. Non-discrimination includes the right to reasonable accommodation in the exercise of legal capacity (art. 5, para. 3). Reasonable accommodation is defined in article 2 of the Convention as "necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms". The right to reasonable accommodation in the exercise of legal capacity is separate from, and complementary to, the right to support in the exercise of legal

capacity. States parties are required to make any necessary modifications or adjustments to allow persons with disabilities to exercise their legal capacity, unless it is a disproportionate or undue burden. Such modifications or adjustments may include, but are not limited to, access to essential buildings such as courts, banks, social benefit offices and voting venues; accessible information regarding decisions which have legal effect; and personal assistance. The right to support in the exercise of legal capacity shall not be limited by the claim of disproportionate or undue burden. The State has an absolute obligation to provide access to support in the exercise of legal capacity.

Article 6: Women with disabilities

35. Article 15 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women provides for women's legal capacity on an equal basis with men, thereby acknowledging that recognition of legal capacity is integral to equal recognition before the law: "States parties shall accord to women, in civil matters, a legal capacity identical to that of men and the same opportunities to exercise that capacity. In particular, they shall give women equal rights to conclude contracts and to administer property and shall treat them equally in all stages of procedure in courts and tribunals" (para. 2). This provision applies to all women, including women with disabilities. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes that women with disabilities may be subject to multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination based on gender and disability. For example, women with disabilities are subjected to high rates of forced sterilization, and are often denied control of their reproductive health and decision-making, the assumption being that they are not capable of consenting to sex. Certain jurisdictions also have higher rates of imposing substitute decision-makers on women than on men. Therefore, it is particularly important to reaffirm that the legal capacity of women with disabilities should be recognized on an equal basis with others.

Article 7: Children with disabilities

36. While article 12 of the Convention protects equality before the law for all persons, regardless of age, article 7 of the Convention recognizes the developing capacities of children and requires that "in all actions concerning children with disabilities, the best interests of the child ... be a primary consideration" (para. 2) and that "their views [be] given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity" (para. 3). To comply with article 12, States parties must examine their laws to ensure that the will and preferences of children with disabilities are respected on an equal basis with other children.

Article 9: Accessibility

37. The rights provided for in article 12 are closely tied to State obligations relating to accessibility (art. 9) because the right to equal recognition before the law is necessary to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life. Article 9 requires the identification and elimination of barriers to facilities or services open or provided to the public. Lack of accessibility to information and communication and inaccessible services may constitute barriers to the realization of legal capacity for some persons with disabilities, in practice. Therefore, States parties must make all procedures for the exercise of legal capacity, and all information and communication pertaining to it, fully accessible. States parties must review their laws and practices to ensure that the right to legal capacity and accessibility are being realized.

Article 13: Access to justice

38. States parties have an obligation to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to justice on an equal basis with others. The recognition of the right to legal capacity is essential for access to justice in many respects. In order to seek enforcement of their rights and obligations on an equal basis with others, persons with disabilities must be recognized as persons before the law with equal standing in courts and tribunals. States parties must also ensure that persons with disabilities have access to legal representation on an equal basis with others. This has been identified as a problem in many jurisdictions and must be remedied, including by ensuring that persons who experience interference with their right to legal capacity have the opportunity to challenge such interference — on their own behalf or with legal representation — and to defend their rights in court. Persons with disabilities have often been excluded from key roles in the justice system as lawyers, judges, witnesses or members of a jury.

39. Police officers, social workers and other first responders must be trained to recognize persons with disabilities as full persons before the law and to give the same weight to complaints and statements from persons with disabilities as they would to non-disabled persons. This entails training and awareness-raising in these important professions. Persons with disabilities must also be granted legal capacity to testify on an equal basis with others. Article 12 of the Convention guarantees support in the exercise of legal capacity, including the capacity to testify in judicial, administrative and other legal proceedings. Such support could take various forms, including recognition of diverse communication methods, allowing video testimony in certain situations, procedural accommodation, the provision of professional sign language interpretation and other assistive methods. The judiciary must also be trained and made aware of their obligation to respect the legal capacity of persons with disabilities, including legal agency and standing.

Articles 14 and 25: Liberty, security and consent

40. Respecting the right to legal capacity of persons with disabilities on an equal basis with others includes respecting the right of persons with disabilities to liberty and security of the person. The denial of the legal capacity of persons with disabilities and their detention in institutions against their will, either without their consent or with the consent of a substitute decision-maker, is an ongoing problem. This practice constitutes arbitrary deprivation of liberty and violates articles 12 and 14 of the Convention. States parties must refrain from such practices and establish a mechanism to review cases whereby persons with disabilities have been placed in a residential setting without their specific consent.

41. The right to enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health (art. 25) includes the right to health care on the basis of free and informed consent. States parties have an obligation to require all health and medical professionals (including psychiatric professionals) to obtain the free and informed consent of persons with disabilities prior to any treatment. In conjunction with the right to legal capacity on an equal basis with others, States parties have an obligation not to permit substitute decision-makers to provide consent on behalf of persons with disabilities. All health and medical personnel should ensure appropriate consultation that directly engages the person with disabilities. They should also ensure, to the best of their ability, that assistants or support persons do not substitute or have undue influence over the decisions of persons with disabilities.

Articles 15, 16 and 17: Respect for personal integrity and freedom from torture, violence, exploitation and abuse

42. As has been stated by the Committee in several concluding observations, forced treatment by psychiatric and other health and medical professionals is a violation of the right to equal recognition before the law and an infringement of the rights to personal integrity (art. 17); freedom from torture (art. 15); and freedom from violence, exploitation and abuse (art. 16). This practice denies the legal capacity of a person to choose medical treatment and is therefore a violation of article 12 of the Convention. States parties must, instead, respect the legal capacity of persons with disabilities to make decisions at all times, including in crisis situations; must ensure that accurate and accessible information is provided about service options and that non-medical approaches are made available; and must provide access to independent support. States parties have an obligation to provide access to support for decisions regarding psychiatric and other medical treatment. Forced treatment is a particular problem for persons with psychosocial, intellectual and other cognitive disabilities. States parties must abolish policies and legislative provisions that allow or perpetrate forced treatment, as it is an ongoing violation found in mental health laws across the globe, despite empirical evidence indicating its lack of effectiveness and the views of people using mental health systems who have experienced deep pain and trauma as a result of forced treatment. The Committee recommends that States parties ensure that decisions relating to a person's physical or mental integrity can only be taken with the free and informed consent of the person concerned.

Article 18: Nationality

43. Persons with disabilities have the right to a name and registration of their birth as part of the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law (art. 18, para. 2). States parties must take the necessary measures to ensure that children with disabilities are registered at birth. This right is provided for in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (art. 7); however, children with disabilities are disproportionately likely not to be registered as compared with other children. This not only denies them citizenship, but often also denies them access to health care and education, and can even lead to their death. Since there is no official record of their existence, their death may occur with relative impunity.

Article 19: Living independently and being included in the community

44. To fully realize the rights provided for in article 12, it is imperative that persons with disabilities have opportunities to develop and express their will and preferences, in order to exercise their legal capacity on an equal basis with others. This means that persons with disabilities must have the opportunity to live independently in the community and to make choices and to have control over their everyday lives, on an equal basis with others, as provided for in article 19.

45. Interpreting article 12, paragraph 3, in the light of the right to live in the community (art. 19) means that support in the exercise of legal capacity should be provided through a community-based approach. States parties must recognize that communities are assets and partners in the process of learning what types of support are needed in the exercise of legal capacity, including raising awareness about different support options. States parties must recognize the social networks and naturally occurring community support (including friends, family and schools) of persons with disabilities as key to supported decision-making. This is consistent with the Convention's emphasis on the full inclusion and participation of persons with disabilities in the community.

46. The segregation of persons with disabilities in institutions continues to be a pervasive and insidious problem that violates a number of the rights guaranteed under the Convention. The problem is exacerbated by the widespread denial of legal capacity to persons with disabilities, which allows others to consent to their placement in institutional settings. The directors of institutions are also commonly vested with the legal capacity of the persons residing therein. This places all power and control over the person in the hands of the institution. In order to comply with the Convention and respect the human rights of persons with disabilities, deinstitutionalization must be achieved and legal capacity must be restored to all persons with disabilities, who must be able to choose where and with whom to live (art. 19). A person's choice of where and with whom to live should not affect his or her right to access support in the exercise of his or her legal capacity.

Article 22: Privacy

47. Substitute decision-making regimes, in addition to being incompatible with article 12 of the Convention, also potentially violate the right to privacy of persons with disabilities, as substitute decision-makers usually gain access to a wide range of personal and other information regarding the person. In establishing supported decision-making systems, States parties must ensure that those providing support in the exercise of legal capacity fully respect the right to privacy of persons with disabilities.

Article 29: Political participation

48. Denial or restriction of legal capacity has been used to deny political participation, especially the right to vote, to certain persons with disabilities. In order to fully realize the equal recognition of legal capacity in all aspects of life, it is important to recognize the legal capacity of persons with disabilities in public and political life (art. 29). This means that a person's decision-making ability cannot be a justification for any exclusion of persons with disabilities from exercising their political rights, including the right to vote, the right to stand for election and the right to serve as a member of a jury.

49. States parties have an obligation to protect and promote the right of persons with disabilities to access the support of their choice in voting by secret ballot, and to participate in all elections and referendums without discrimination. The Committee further recommends that States parties guarantee the right of persons with disabilities to stand for election, to hold office effectively and to perform all public functions at all levels of government, with reasonable accommodation and support, where desired, in the exercise of their legal capacity.

V. Implementation at the national level

50. In the light of the normative content and obligations outlined above, States parties should take the following steps to ensure the full implementation of article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:

(a) Recognize persons with disabilities as persons before the law, having legal personality and legal capacity in all aspects of life, on an equal basis with others. This requires the abolition of substitute decision-making regimes and mechanisms that deny legal capacity and which discriminate in purpose or effect against persons with disabilities. It is recommended that States parties create statutory language protecting the right to legal capacity on an equal basis for all;

(b) Establish, recognize and provide persons with disabilities with access to a broad range of support in the exercise of their legal capacity. Safeguards for such support must be premised on respect for the rights, will and preferences of persons with disabilities. The support should meet the criteria set out in paragraph 29 above on the obligations of States parties to comply with article 12, paragraph 3, of the Convention;

(c) Closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the development and implementation of legislation, policies and other decision-making processes that give effect to article 12.

51. The Committee encourages States parties to undertake or devote resources to the research and development of best practices respecting the right to equal recognition of the legal capacity of persons with disabilities and support in the exercise of legal capacity.

52. States parties are encouraged to develop effective mechanisms to combat both formal and informal substitute decision-making. To this end, the Committee urges States parties to ensure that persons with disabilities have the opportunity to make meaningful choices in their lives and develop their personalities, to support the exercise of their legal capacity. This includes, but is not limited to, opportunities to build social networks; opportunities to work and earn a living on an equal basis with others; multiple choices for place of residence in the community; and inclusion in education at all levels.



Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Distr.: General
22 May 2014

Original: English

Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Eleventh session

31 March–11 April 2014

General comment No. 2 (2014)

Article 9: Accessibility

I. Introduction

1. Accessibility is a precondition for persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully and equally in society. Without access to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communication, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, persons with disabilities would not have equal opportunities for participation in their respective societies. It is no coincidence that accessibility is one of the principles on which the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is based (art. 3 (f)). Historically, the persons with disabilities movement has argued that access to the physical environment and public transport for persons with disabilities is a precondition for freedom of movement, as guaranteed under article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Similarly, access to information and communication is seen as a precondition for freedom of opinion and expression, as guaranteed under article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 19, paragraph 2, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

2. Article 25 (c) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights enshrines the right of every citizen to have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his or her country. The provisions of this article could serve as a basis to incorporate the right of access into the core human rights treaties.

3. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination guarantees everyone the right of access to any place or service intended for use by the general public, such as transport, hotels, restaurants, cafes, theatres and parks (art. 5 (f)). Thus, a precedent has been established in the international human rights legal framework for viewing the right to access as a right per se. Admittedly, for members of different racial or ethnic groups, the barriers to free access to places and services open to the public were the result of prejudicial attitudes and a readiness to use force in preventing access to spaces that were physically accessible. However, persons with disabilities face technical and environmental — in most cases, human-built environmental — barriers such

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as steps at the entrances of buildings, the absence of lifts in multi-floor buildings and a lack of information in accessible formats. The built environment always relates to social and cultural development as well as customs; therefore the built environment is under the full control of society. Such artificial barriers are often the result of a lack of information and technical know-how rather than a conscious will to prevent persons with disabilities from accessing places or services intended for use by the general public. In order to introduce policies that allow better accessibility for persons with disabilities, it is necessary to change attitudes towards persons with disabilities in order to fight against stigma and discrimination, through ongoing education efforts, awareness-raising, cultural campaigns and communication.

4. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination clearly establish the right of access as part of international human rights law. Accessibility should be viewed as a disability-specific reaffirmation of the social aspect of the right of access. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities includes accessibility as one of its key underlying principles — a vital precondition for the effective and equal enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights by persons with disabilities. Accessibility should be viewed not only in the context of equality and non-discrimination, but also as a way of investing in society and as an integral part of the sustainable development agenda.

5. While different people and organizations understand differently what information and communications technology (ICT) means, it is generally acknowledged that ICT is an umbrella term that includes any information and communication device or application and its content. Such a definition encompasses a wide range of access technologies, such as radio, television, satellite, mobile phones, fixed lines, computers, network hardware and software. The importance of ICT lies in its ability to open up a wide range of services, transform existing services and create greater demand for access to information and knowledge, particularly in underserved and excluded populations, such as persons with disabilities. Article 12 of the International Telecommunication Regulations (adopted in Dubai in 2012) enshrines the right for persons with disabilities to access international telecommunication services, taking into account the relevant International Telecommunication Union (ITU) recommendations. The provisions of that article could serve as a basis for reinforcing States parties' national legislative frameworks.

6. In its general comment No. 5 (1994) on persons with disabilities, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights evoked the duty of States to implement the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.¹ The Standard Rules highlight the significance of the accessibility of the physical environment, transport, information and communication for the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities. The concept is developed in rule 5, in which access to the physical environment, and access to information and communication are targeted as areas for priority action for States. The significance of accessibility can be derived also from general comment No. 14 (2000) of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on the right to the highest attainable standard of health (para. 12). In its general comment No. 9 (2006) on the rights of children with disabilities, the Committee on the Rights of the Child emphasizes that the physical inaccessibility of public transportation and other facilities, including governmental buildings, shopping areas and recreational facilities, is a major factor in the marginalization and exclusion of children with disabilities

¹ General Assembly resolution 48/96, annex.

and markedly compromises their access to services, including health and education (para. 39). The importance of accessibility was reiterated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its general comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts.

7. The *World Report on Disability Summary*, published in 2011 by the World Health Organization and the World Bank within the framework of the largest consultation ever and with the active involvement of hundreds of professionals in the field of disability, stresses that the built environment, transport systems and information and communication are often inaccessible to persons with disabilities (p. 10). Persons with disabilities are prevented from enjoying some of their basic rights, such as the right to seek employment or the right to health care, owing to a lack of accessible transport. The level of implementation of accessibility laws remains low in many countries and persons with disabilities are often denied their right to freedom of expression owing to the inaccessibility of information and communication. Even in countries where sign language interpretation services exist for deaf persons, the number of qualified interpreters is usually too low to meet the increasing demand for their services, and the fact that the interpreters have to travel individually to clients makes the use of their services too expensive. Persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities as well as deaf-blind persons face barriers when attempting to access information and communication owing to a lack of easy-to-read formats and augmentative and alternative modes of communication. They also face barriers when attempting to access services due to prejudices and a lack of adequate training of the staff providing those services.

8. The report, *Making Television Accessible*, published in 2011 by the International Telecommunication Union in cooperation with the Global Initiative for Inclusive Information and Communication Technologies, highlights that a significant proportion of the one billion people who live with some form of disability are unable to enjoy the audiovisual content of television. This is due to the inaccessibility of content, information and/or devices necessary for them to access those services.

9. Accessibility was recognized by the mainstream ICT community since the first phase of the World Summit on Information Society, held in Geneva in 2003. Introduced and driven by the disability community, the concept was incorporated in the Declaration of Principles adopted by the Summit, which in paragraph 25 state, "the sharing and strengthening of global knowledge for development can be enhanced by removing barriers to equitable access to information for economic, social, political, health, cultural, educational, and scientific activities and by facilitating access to public domain information, including by universal design and the use of assistive technologies".²

10. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has considered accessibility as one of the key issues in each of the 10 interactive dialogues it has held with States parties during the consideration of their initial reports, prior to the drafting of the present general comment. The concluding observations on those reports all contain recommendations concerning accessibility. One common challenge has been the lack of an adequate monitoring mechanism to ensure the practical implementation of accessibility standards and relevant legislation. In some States parties, monitoring was the responsibility of local authorities that lacked the technical knowledge and the human and material

² See "Declaration of Principles: Building the Information Society: a global challenge in the new Millennium", adopted by the World Summit on the Information Society at its first phase, held in Geneva in 2003 (WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/4-E), para. 25.

resources to ensure effective implementation. Another common challenge has been the lack of training provided to the relevant stakeholders and insufficient involvement of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in the process of ensuring access to the physical environment, transport, information and communication.

11. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has also addressed the issue of accessibility in its jurisprudence. In the case of *Nyusti and Takács v. Hungary* (communication No. 1/2010, Views adopted on 16 April 2013), the Committee was of the view that all services open or provided to the public must be accessible in accordance with the provisions of article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The State party was called upon to ensure that blind persons had access to automatic teller machines (ATMs). The Committee recommended, inter alia, that the State party establish "minimum standards for the accessibility of banking services provided by private financial institutions for persons with visual and other types of impairments; ... create a legislative framework with concrete, enforceable and time-bound benchmarks for monitoring and assessing the gradual modification and adjustment by private financial institutions of previously inaccessible banking services provided by them into accessible ones; ... and ensure that all newly procured ATMs and other banking services are fully accessible for persons with disabilities" (para. 10.2 (a)).

12. Given these precedents and the fact that accessibility is indeed a vital precondition for persons with disabilities to participate fully and equally in society and enjoy effectively all their human rights and fundamental freedoms, the Committee finds it necessary to adopt a general comment on article 9 of the Convention on accessibility, in accordance with its rules of procedure and the established practice of the human rights treaty bodies.

II. Normative content

13. Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stipulates that, "to enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communication, including information and communication technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas". It is important that accessibility is addressed in all its complexity, encompassing the physical environment, transportation, information and communication, and services. The focus is no longer on legal personality and the public or private nature of those who own buildings, transport infrastructure, vehicles, information and communication, and services. As long as goods, products and services are open or provided to the public, they must be accessible to all, regardless of whether they are owned and/or provided by a public authority or a private enterprise. Persons with disabilities should have equal access to all goods, products and services that are open or provided to the public in a manner that ensures their effective and equal access and respects their dignity. This approach stems from the prohibition against discrimination; denial of access should be considered to constitute a discriminatory act, regardless of whether the perpetrator is a public or private entity. Accessibility should be provided to all persons with disabilities, regardless of the type of impairment, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, legal or social status, gender or age. Accessibility should especially take into account the gender and age perspectives for persons with disabilities.

14. Article 9 of the Convention clearly enshrines accessibility as the precondition for persons with disabilities to live independently, participate fully and equally in society, and have unrestricted enjoyment of all their human rights and fundamental freedoms on an

equal basis with others. Article 9 has roots in existing human rights treaties, such as article 25 (c) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on the right to equal access to public service, and article 5 (f) of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination on the right of access to any place or service intended for public use. When those two core human rights treaties were adopted, the Internet, which has changed the world dramatically, did not exist. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is the first human rights treaty of the 21st century to address access to ICTs; and it does not create new rights in that regard for persons with disabilities. Furthermore, the notion of equality in international law has also changed over the past decades, with the conceptual shift from formal equality to substantive equality having an impact on the duties of States parties. States' obligation to provide accessibility is an essential part of the new duty to respect, protect and fulfil equality rights. Accessibility should therefore be considered in the context of the right to access from the specific perspective of disability. The right to access for persons with disabilities is ensured through strict implementation of accessibility standards. Barriers to access to existing objects, facilities, goods and services aimed at or open to the public shall be removed gradually in a systematic and, more importantly, continuously monitored manner, with the aim of achieving full accessibility.

15. The strict application of universal design to all new goods, products, facilities, technologies and services should ensure full, equal and unrestricted access for all potential consumers, including persons with disabilities, in a way that takes full account of their inherent dignity and diversity. It should contribute to the creation of an unrestricted chain of movement for an individual from one space to another, including movement inside particular spaces, with no barriers. Persons with disabilities and other users should be able to move in barrier-free streets, enter accessible low-floor vehicles, access information and communication, and enter and move inside universally designed buildings, using technical aids and live assistance where necessary. The application of universal design does not automatically eliminate the need for technical aids. Its application to a building from the initial design stage helps to make construction much less costly: making a building accessible from the outset might not increase the total cost of construction at all in many cases, or only minimally in some cases. On the other hand, the cost of subsequent adaptations in order to make a building accessible may be considerable in some cases, especially with regard to certain historical buildings. While the initial application of universal design is more economical, the potential cost of subsequent removal of barriers may not be used as an excuse to avoid the obligation to remove barriers to accessibility gradually. Accessibility of information and communication, including ICT, should also be achieved from the outset because subsequent adaptations to the Internet and ICT may increase costs. It is therefore more economical to incorporate mandatory ICT accessibility features from the earliest stages of design and production.

16. The application of universal design makes society accessible for all human beings, not only persons with disabilities. It is also significant that article 9 explicitly imposes on States parties the duty to ensure accessibility in both urban and rural areas. Evidence has shown that accessibility is usually better in bigger cities than in remote, less developed rural areas, although extensive urbanization can sometimes also create additional new barriers that prevent access for persons with disabilities, in particular to the built environment, transport and services, as well as more sophisticated information and communication services in heavily populated, bustling urban areas. In both urban and rural areas, access should be available for persons with disabilities to the natural and heritage parts of the physical environment that the public can enter and enjoy.

17. Article 9, paragraph 1, requires States parties to identify and eliminate obstacles and barriers to accessibility to, *inter alia*:

(a) Buildings, roads, transportation and other indoor and outdoor facilities, including schools, housing, medical facilities and workplaces;

(b) Information, communications and other services, including electronic services and emergency services.

The other indoor and outdoor facilities, mentioned above, should include law enforcement agencies, tribunals, prisons, social institutions, areas for social interaction and recreation, cultural, religious, political and sports activities, and shopping establishments. Other services should include postal, banking, telecommunication and information services.

18. Article 9, paragraph 2, stipulates the measures States parties must take in order to develop, promulgate and monitor the implementation of minimum national standards for the accessibility of facilities and services open or provided to the public. Those standards shall be in accordance with the standards of other States parties in order to ensure interoperability with regard to free movement within the framework of liberty of movement and nationality (art. 18) of persons with disabilities. States parties are also required to take measures to ensure that private entities that offer facilities and services that are open or provided to the public take into account all aspects of accessibility for persons with disabilities (art. 9, para. 2 (b)).

19. Since a lack of accessibility is often the result of insufficient awareness and technical know-how, article 9 requires that States parties provide training to all stakeholders on accessibility for persons with disabilities (para. 2 (c)). Article 9 does not attempt to enumerate the relevant stakeholders; any exhaustive list should include the authorities that issue building permits, broadcasting boards and ICT licences, engineers, designers, architects, urban planners, transport authorities, service providers, members of the academic community and persons with disabilities and their organizations. Training should be provided not only to those designing goods, services and products, but also to those who actually produce them. In addition, strengthening the direct involvement of persons with disabilities in product development would improve the understanding of existing needs and the effectiveness of accessibility tests. Ultimately, it is the builders on the construction site who make a building accessible or not. It is important to put in place training and monitoring systems for all these groups in order to ensure the practical application of accessibility standards.

20. Movement and orientation in buildings and other places open to the public can be a challenge for some persons with disabilities if there is no adequate signage, accessible information and communication or support services. Article 9, paragraph 2 (d) and (e), therefore provides that buildings and other places open to the public should have signage in Braille and in easy-to-read and understand forms, and that live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign-language interpreters should be provided to facilitate accessibility. Without such signage, accessible information and communication and support services, orientation and movement in and through buildings may become impossible for many persons with disabilities, especially those experiencing cognitive fatigue.

21. Without access to information and communication, enjoyment of freedom of thought and expression and many other basic rights and freedoms for persons with disabilities may be seriously undermined and restricted. Article 9, paragraph 2 (f) to (g), of the Convention therefore provide that States parties should promote live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters (para. 2 (e)), promote other appropriate forms of assistance and support to persons with disabilities to ensure their access to information, and promote access for persons with disabilities to new information and communications technologies and systems, including the Internet, through the application of mandatory accessibility standards. Information and communication should be

available in easy-to-read formats and augmentative and alternative modes and methods to persons with disabilities who use such formats, modes and methods.

22. New technologies can be used to promote the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities in society, but only if they are designed and produced in a way that ensures their accessibility. New investments, research and production should contribute to eliminating inequality, not creating new barriers. Article 9, paragraph 2 (h), therefore calls on States parties to promote the design, development, production and distribution of accessible information and communications technologies and systems at an early stage, so that these technologies and systems become accessible at minimum cost. The use of hearing enhancement systems, including ambient assistive systems to assist hearing aid and induction loop users, and passenger lifts pre-equipped to allow use by persons with disabilities during emergency building evacuations constitute just some of the examples of technological advancements in the service of accessibility.

23. Since accessibility is a precondition for persons with disabilities to live independently, as provided for in article 19 of the Convention, and to participate fully and equally in society, denial of access to the physical environment, transportation, information and communication technologies, and facilities and services open to the public should be viewed in the context of discrimination. Taking "all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices that constitute discrimination against persons with disabilities" (art. 4, para. 1 (b)) constitutes the main general obligation for all States parties. "States parties shall prohibit all discrimination on the basis of disability and guarantee to persons with disabilities equal and effective legal protection against discrimination on all grounds" (art. 5, para. 2). "In order to promote equality and eliminate discrimination, States parties shall take all appropriate steps to ensure that reasonable accommodation is provided" (art. 5, para. 3).

24. A clear distinction should be drawn between the obligation to ensure access to all newly designed, built or produced objects, infrastructure, goods, products and services and the obligation to remove barriers and ensure access to the existing physical environment and existing transportation, information and communication, and services open to the general public. Another of the States parties' general obligations is to "undertake or promote research and development of universally designed goods, services, equipment and facilities, as defined in article 2 of the Convention, which should require the minimum possible adaptation and the least cost to meet the specific needs of a person with disabilities, to promote their availability and use, and to promote universal design in the development of standards and guidelines" (art. 4, para. 1 (f)). All new objects, infrastructure, facilities, goods, products and services have to be designed in a way that makes them fully accessible for persons with disabilities, in accordance with the principles of universal design. States parties are obliged to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to the existing physical environment, transportation, information and communication and services open to the general public. However, as this obligation is to be implemented gradually, States parties should establish definite time frames and allocate adequate resources for the removal of existing barriers. Furthermore, States parties should clearly prescribe the duties of the different authorities (including regional and local authorities) and entities (including private entities) that should be carried out in order to ensure accessibility. States parties should also prescribe effective monitoring mechanisms to ensure accessibility and monitor sanctions against anyone who fails to implement accessibility standards.

25. Accessibility is related to groups, whereas reasonable accommodation is related to individuals. This means that the duty to provide accessibility is an *ex ante* duty. States parties therefore have the duty to provide accessibility before receiving an individual request to enter or use a place or service. States parties need to set accessibility standards,

which must be adopted in consultation with organizations of persons with disabilities, and they need to be specified for service-providers, builders and other relevant stakeholders. Accessibility standards must be broad and standardized. In the case of individuals who have rare impairments that were not taken into account when the accessibility standards were developed or who do not use the modes, methods or means offered to achieve accessibility (not reading Braille, for example), even the application of accessibility standards may not be sufficient to ensure them access. In such cases, reasonable accommodation may apply. In accordance with the Convention, States parties are not allowed to use austerity measures as an excuse to avoid ensuring gradual accessibility for persons with disabilities. The obligation to implement accessibility is *unconditional*, i.e. the entity obliged to provide accessibility may not excuse the omission to do so by referring to the burden of providing access for persons with disabilities. The duty of reasonable accommodation, contrarily, exists only if implementation constitutes no undue burden on the entity.

26. The duty to provide reasonable accommodation is an *ex nunc* duty, which means that it is enforceable from the moment an individual with an impairment needs it in a given situation, for example, workplace or school, in order to enjoy her or his rights on an equal basis in a particular context. Here, accessibility standards can be an indicator, but may not be taken as prescriptive. Reasonable accommodation can be used as a means of ensuring accessibility for an individual with a disability in a particular situation. Reasonable accommodation seeks to achieve individual justice in the sense that non-discrimination or equality is assured, taking the dignity, autonomy and choices of the individual into account. Thus, a person with a rare impairment might ask for accommodation that falls outside the scope of any accessibility standard.

III. Obligations of States parties

27. Even though ensuring access to the physical environment, transportation, information and communication, and services open to the public is often a precondition for the effective enjoyment of various civil and political rights by persons with disabilities, States parties can ensure that access is achieved through gradual implementation when necessary as well as through the use of international cooperation. An analysis of the situation to identify the obstacles and barriers that need to be removed can be carried out in an efficient manner and within a short- to mid-term framework. Barriers should be removed in a continuous and systematic way, gradually yet steadily.

28. States parties are obliged to adopt, promulgate and monitor national accessibility standards. If no relevant legislation is in place, adopting a suitable legal framework is the first step. States parties should undertake a comprehensive review of the laws on accessibility in order to identify, monitor and address gaps in legislation and implementation. Disability laws often fail to include ICT in their definition of accessibility, and disability rights laws concerned with non-discriminatory access in areas such as procurement, employment and education often fail to include access to ICT and the many goods and services central to modern society that are offered through ICT. It is important that the review and adoption of these laws and regulations are carried out in close consultation with persons with disabilities and their representative organizations (art. 4, para. 3), as well as all other relevant stakeholders, including members of the academic community and expert associations of architects, urban planners, engineers and designers. Legislation should incorporate and be based on the principle of universal design, as required by the Convention (art. 4, para. 1 (f)). It should provide for the mandatory application of accessibility standards and for sanctions, including fines, for those who fail to apply them.

29. It is helpful to mainstream accessibility standards that prescribe various areas that have to be accessible, such as the physical environment in laws on construction and planning, transportation in laws on public aerial, railway, road and water transport, information and communication, and services open to the public. However, accessibility should be encompassed in general and specific laws on equal opportunities, equality and participation in the context of the prohibition of disability-based discrimination. Denial of access should be clearly defined as a prohibited act of discrimination. Persons with disabilities who have been denied access to the physical environment, transportation, information and communication, or services open to the public should have effective legal remedies at their disposal. When defining accessibility standards, States parties have to take into account the diversity of persons with disabilities and ensure that accessibility is provided to persons of any gender and of all ages and types of disability. Part of the task of encompassing the diversity of persons with disabilities in the provision of accessibility is recognizing that some persons with disabilities need human or animal assistance in order to enjoy full accessibility (such as personal assistance, sign language interpretation, tactile sign language interpretation or guide dogs). It must be stipulated, for example, that banning guide dogs from entering a particular building or open space would constitute a prohibited act of disability-based discrimination.

30. It is necessary to establish minimum standards for the accessibility of different services provided by public and private enterprises for persons with different types of impairments. Reference tools such as the ITU-T recommendation Telecommunications Accessibility Checklist for standardization activities (2006) and the Telecommunications accessibility guidelines for older persons and persons with disabilities (ITU-T recommendation F.790) should be mainstreamed whenever a new ICT-related standard is developed. That would allow the generalization of universal design in the development of standards. States parties should establish a legislative framework with specific, enforceable, time-bound benchmarks for monitoring and assessing the gradual modification and adjustment by private entities of their previously inaccessible services into accessible ones. States parties should also ensure that all newly procured goods and services are fully accessible for persons with disabilities. Minimum standards must be developed in close consultation with persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, in accordance with article 4, paragraph 3, of the Convention. The standards can also be developed in collaboration with other States parties and international organizations and agencies through international cooperation, in accordance with article 32 of the Convention. States parties are encouraged to join ITU study groups in the radiocommunication, standardization and development sectors of the Union, which actively work at mainstreaming accessibility in the development of international telecommunications and ICT standards and at raising industry's and governments' awareness of the need to increase access to ICT for persons with disabilities. Such cooperation can be useful in developing and promoting international standards that contribute to the interoperability of goods and services. In the field of communication-related services, States parties must ensure at least a minimum quality of services, especially for the relatively new types of services, such as personal assistance, sign language interpretation and tactile signing, aiming at their standardization.

31. When reviewing their accessibility legislation, States parties must consider and, where necessary, amend their laws to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability. As a minimum, the following situations in which lack of accessibility has prevented a person with disabilities from accessing a service or facility open to the public should be considered as prohibited acts of disability-based discrimination:

(a) Where the service or facility was established after relevant accessibility standards were introduced;

(b) Where access could have been granted to the facility or service (when it came into existence) through reasonable accommodation.

32. As part of their review of accessibility legislation, States parties must also consider their laws on public procurement to ensure that their public procurement procedures incorporate accessibility requirements. It is unacceptable to use public funds to create or perpetuate the inequality that inevitably results from inaccessible services and facilities. Public procurements should be used to implement affirmative action in line with the provisions of article 5, paragraph 4, of the Convention in order to ensure accessibility and de facto equality for persons with disabilities.

33. States parties should adopt action plans and strategies to: identify existing barriers to accessibility, set time frames with specific deadlines and provide both the human and material resources necessary to remove the barriers. Once adopted, such action plans and strategies should be strictly implemented. States parties should also strengthen their monitoring mechanisms in order to ensure accessibility and they should continue providing sufficient funds to remove barriers to accessibility and train monitoring staff. As accessibility standards are often implemented locally, continuous capacity-building of the local authorities responsible for monitoring implementation of the standards is of paramount importance. States parties are under an obligation to develop an effective monitoring framework and set up efficient monitoring bodies with adequate capacity and appropriate mandates to make sure that plans, strategies and standardization are implemented and enforced.

IV. Relationship with other articles of the Convention

34. The duty of States parties to ensure access to the physical environment, transportation, information and communication, and services open to the public for persons with disabilities should be seen from the perspective of equality and non-discrimination. Denial of access to the physical environment, transportation, information and communication, and services open to the public constitutes an act of disability-based discrimination that is prohibited by article 5 of the Convention. Ensuring accessibility *pro futuro* should be viewed in the context of implementing the general obligation to develop universally designed goods, services, equipment and facilities (art. 4, para. 1 (f)).

35. Awareness-raising is one of the preconditions for the effective implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Since accessibility is often viewed narrowly, as accessibility to the built environment (which is significant, but only one aspect of access for persons with disabilities), States parties should strive systematically and continuously to raise awareness about accessibility among all relevant stakeholders. The all-encompassing nature of accessibility should be addressed, providing for access to the physical environment, transportation, information and communication, and services. Awareness-raising should also stress that the duty to observe accessibility standards applies equally to the public and to the private sector. It should promote the application of universal design and the idea that designing and building in an accessible way from the earliest stages is cost-effective and economical. Awareness-raising should be carried out in cooperation with persons with disabilities, their representative organizations and technical experts. Special attention should be paid to capacity-building for the application and monitoring of the implementation of accessibility standards. The media should not only take into account the accessibility of their own programmes and services for persons with disabilities, but should also take an active role in promoting accessibility and contributing to awareness-raising.

36. Ensuring full access to the physical environment, transportation, information and communication, and services open to the public is indeed a vital precondition for the effective enjoyment of many rights covered by the Convention. In situations of risk, natural disasters and armed conflict, the emergency services must be accessible to persons with disabilities, or their lives cannot be saved or their well-being protected (art. 11). Accessibility must be incorporated as a priority in post-disaster reconstruction efforts. Therefore, disaster risk reduction must be accessible and disability-inclusive.

37. There can be no effective access to justice if the buildings in which law-enforcement agencies and the judiciary are located are not physically accessible, or if the services, information and communication they provide are not accessible to persons with disabilities (art. 13). Safe houses, support services and procedures must all be accessible in order to provide effective and meaningful protection from violence, abuse and exploitation to persons with disabilities, especially women and children (art. 16). Accessible environment, transportation, information and communication, and services are a precondition for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in their respective local communities and for them to have an independent life (art. 19).

38. Articles 9 and 21 intersect on the issue of information and communication. Article 21 provides that States parties "shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities can exercise the right to freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice". It goes on to describe in detail how the accessibility of information and communication can be ensured in practice. It requires that States parties "provide information intended for the general public to persons with disabilities in accessible formats and technologies appropriate to different kinds of disabilities" (art. 21 (a)). Furthermore, it provides for "facilitating the use of sign languages, Braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions" (art. 21 (b)). Private entities that provide services to the general public, including through the Internet, are urged to provide information and services in accessible and usable formats for persons with disabilities (art. 21 (c)) and the mass media, including providers of information through the Internet, are encouraged to make their services accessible to persons with disabilities (art. 21 (d)). Article 21 also requires States parties to recognize and promote the use of sign languages, in accordance with articles 24, 27, 29 and 30 of the Convention.

39. Without accessible transport to schools, accessible school buildings, and accessible information and communication, persons with disabilities would not have the opportunity to exercise their right to education (art. 24 of the Convention). Thus schools have to be accessible, as is explicitly indicated in article 9, paragraph 1 (a), of the Convention. However, it is the entire process of inclusive education that must be accessible, not just buildings, but all information and communication, including ambient or FM assistive systems, support services and reasonable accommodation in schools. In order to foster accessibility, education as well as the content of school curricula should promote and be conducted in sign language, Braille, alternative script, and augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication and orientation (art. 24, para. 3 (a)), with special attention to the appropriate languages and modes and means of communication used by blind, deaf and deaf-blind students. Modes and means of teaching should be accessible and should be conducted in accessible environments. The whole environment of students with disabilities must be designed in a way that fosters inclusion and guarantees their equality in the entire process of their education. Full implementation of article 24 of the Convention should be considered in conjunction with the other core human rights instruments as well as the provisions of the Convention against Discrimination in Education of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

40. Health care and social protection would remain unattainable for persons with disabilities without access to the premises where those services are provided. Even if the buildings where the health-care and social protection services are provided are themselves accessible, without accessible transportation, persons with disabilities are unable to travel to the places where the services are being provided. All information and communication pertaining to the provision of health care should be accessible through sign language, Braille, accessible electronic formats, alternative script, and augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication. It is especially important to take into account the gender dimension of accessibility when providing health care, particularly reproductive health care for women and girls with disabilities, including gynaecological and obstetric services.

41. Persons with disabilities cannot effectively enjoy their work and employment rights, as described in article 27 of the Convention, if the workplace itself is not accessible. Workplaces therefore have to be accessible, as is explicitly indicated in article 9, paragraph 1 (a). A refusal to adapt the workplace constitutes a prohibited act of disability-based discrimination. Besides the physical accessibility of the workplace, persons with disabilities need accessible transport and support services to get to their workplaces. All information pertaining to work, advertisements of job offers, selection processes and communication at the workplace that is part of the work process must be accessible through sign language, Braille, accessible electronic formats, alternative script, and augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication. All trade union and labour rights must also be accessible, as must training opportunities and job qualifications. For example, foreign language or computer courses for employees and trainees must be conducted in an accessible environment in accessible forms, modes, means and formats.

42. Article 28 of the Convention addresses an adequate standard of living and social protection for persons with disabilities. States parties should take the necessary measures to ensure that both mainstream and disability-specific social protection measures and services are provided in an accessible manner, in accessible buildings, and that all information and communication pertaining to them is accessible through sign language, Braille, accessible electronic formats, alternative script, and augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication. Social housing programmes should offer housing that is, inter alia, accessible for persons with disabilities and the elderly.

43. Article 29 of the Convention guarantees persons with disabilities the right to participate in political and public life, and to take part in running public affairs. Persons with disabilities would be unable to exercise those rights equally and effectively if States parties failed to ensure that voting procedures, facilities and materials were appropriate, accessible and easy to understand and use. It is also important that political meetings and materials used and produced by political parties or individual candidates participating in public elections are accessible. If not, persons with disabilities are deprived of their right to participate in the political process in an equal manner. Persons with disabilities who are elected to public office must have equal opportunities to carry out their mandate in a fully accessible manner.

44. Everyone has the right to enjoy the arts, take part in sports and go to hotels, restaurants and bars. However, wheelchair users cannot go to a concert if there are only stairs in the concert hall. Blind persons cannot enjoy a painting if there is no description of it they can hear in the gallery. Hard of hearing persons cannot enjoy a film if there are no subtitles. Deaf persons cannot enjoy a theatrical play if there is no sign language interpretation. Persons with intellectual disabilities cannot enjoy a book if there is no easy-to-read version or a version in augmentative and alternative modes. Article 30 of the Convention requires that States parties recognize the right of persons with disabilities to

take part in cultural life on an equal basis with others. States parties are required to take all appropriate measures to ensure that persons with disabilities:

- (a) Enjoy access to cultural materials in accessible formats;
- (b) Enjoy access to television programmes, films, theatre and other cultural activities, in accessible formats;
- (c) Enjoy access to places for cultural performances or services, such as theatres, museums, cinemas, libraries and tourism services, and, as far as possible, enjoy access to monuments and sites of national cultural importance.

The provision of access to cultural and historical monuments that are part of national heritage may indeed be a challenge in some circumstances. However, States parties are obliged to strive to provide access to these sites. Many monuments and sites of national cultural importance have been made accessible in a way that preserves their cultural and historical identity and uniqueness.

45. "States parties shall take appropriate measures to enable persons with disabilities to have the opportunity to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential" (art. 30, para. 2). "States parties shall take all appropriate steps, in accordance with international law, to ensure that laws protecting intellectual property rights do not constitute an unreasonable or discriminatory barrier to access by persons with disabilities to cultural materials" (art. 30, para. 3). The Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons Who Are Blind, Visually Impaired, or Otherwise Print Disabled of the World Intellectual Property Organization, adopted in June 2013, should ensure access to cultural material without unreasonable or discriminatory barriers for persons with disabilities, including people with disabilities living abroad or as a member of a minority in another country and who speak or use the same language or means of communication, especially those facing challenges accessing classic print materials. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities provides that persons with disabilities are entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity. Article 30, paragraph 4, stresses the recognition of and support for sign languages and deaf culture.

46. Article 30, paragraph 5, of the Convention provides that, in order to enable persons with disabilities to participate on an equal basis with others in recreational, leisure and sporting activities, States parties shall take appropriate measures:

- (a) To encourage and promote the participation, to the fullest extent possible, of persons with disabilities in mainstream sporting activities at all levels;
- (b) To ensure that persons with disabilities have an opportunity to organize, develop and participate in disability-specific sporting and recreational activities and, to this end, encourage the provision, on an equal basis with others, of appropriate instruction, training and resources;
- (c) To ensure that persons with disabilities have access to sporting, recreational and tourism venues;
- (d) To ensure that children with disabilities have equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system;
- (e) To ensure that persons with disabilities have access to services from those involved in the organization of recreational, tourism, leisure and sporting activities.

47. International cooperation, as described in article 32 of the Convention, should be a significant tool in the promotion of accessibility and universal design. The Committee

recommends that international development agencies recognize the significance of supporting projects aimed at improving ICT and other access infrastructure. All new investments made within the framework of international cooperation should be used to encourage the removal of existing barriers and prevent the creation of new barriers. It is unacceptable to use public funds to perpetuate new inequalities. All new objects, infrastructure, facilities, goods, products and services must be fully accessible for all persons with disabilities. International cooperation should be used not merely to invest in accessible goods, products and services, but also to foster the exchange of know-how and information on good practice in achieving accessibility in ways that will make tangible changes that can improve the lives of millions of persons with disabilities worldwide. International cooperation on standardization is also important, as is the fact that organizations of persons with disabilities must be supported so that they can participate in national and international processes to develop, implement and monitor accessibility standards. Accessibility must be an integral part of any sustainable development effort, especially in the context of the post-2015 development agenda.

48. The monitoring of accessibility is a crucial aspect of the national and international monitoring of the implementation of the Convention. Article 33 of the Convention requires States parties to designate focal points within their governments for matters relating to the implementation of the Convention, as well as to establish national frameworks to monitor implementation which include one or more independent mechanisms. Civil society should also be involved and should participate fully in the monitoring process. It is crucial that the bodies established further to article 33 are duly consulted when measures for the proper implementation of article 9 are considered. Those bodies should be provided with meaningful opportunities to, inter alia, take part in the drafting of national accessibility standards, comment on existing and draft legislation, submit proposals for draft legislation and policy regulation, and participate fully in awareness-raising and educational campaigns. The processes of national and international monitoring of the implementation of the Convention should be performed in an accessible manner that promotes and ensures the effective participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations. Article 49 of the Convention requires that the text of the Convention be made available in accessible formats. This is an innovation in an international human rights treaty and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities should be seen as setting a precedent in that respect for all future treaties.